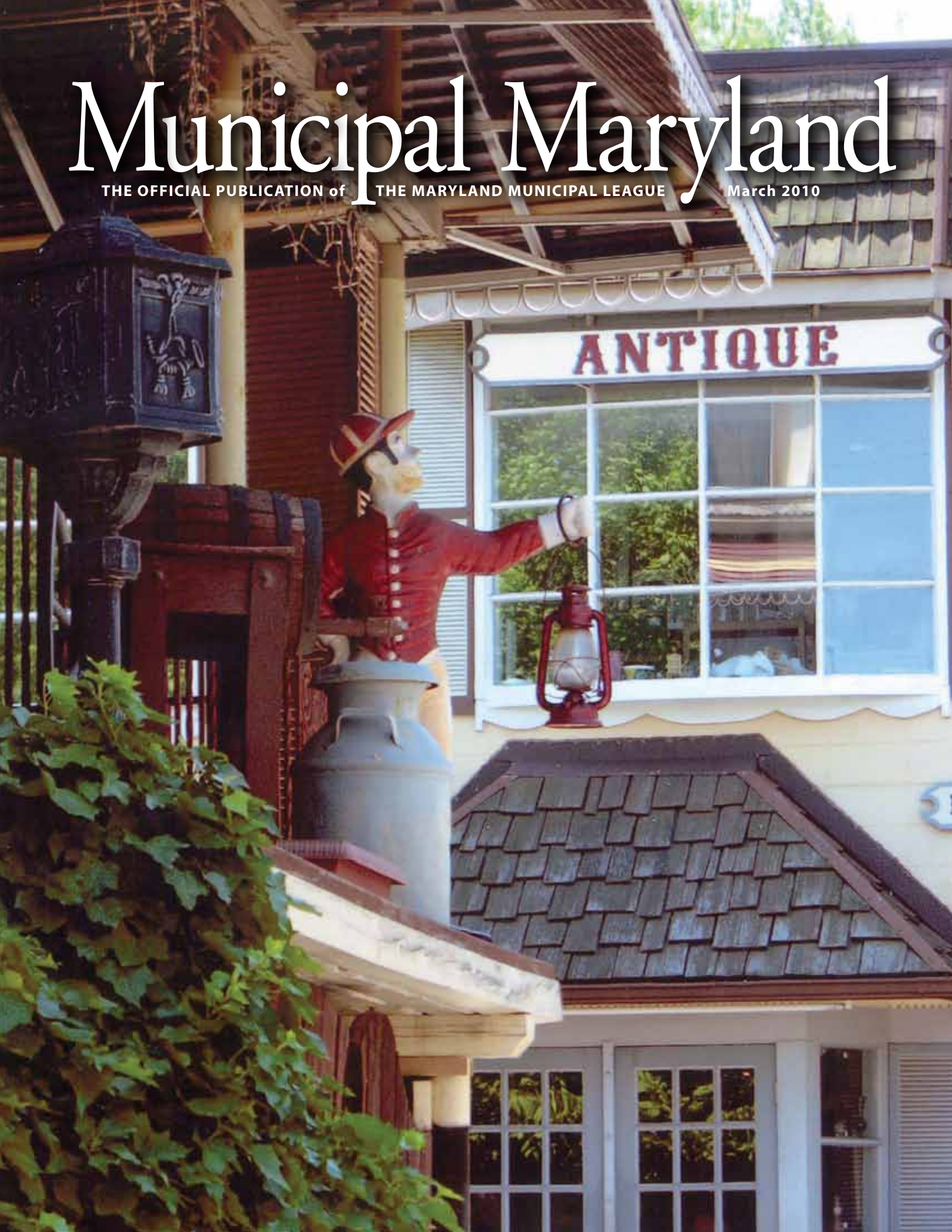


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Kensington: A town at a crossroads

Historic community dusts itself off and polishes its treasures to attract a new future

By Tammy Murphy

“Renewal” is the word Mayor Peter Fosselman chooses to describe the effort underway in Kensington, a small town situated at a commuter crossroads in burgeoning Montgomery County. Like many small municipalities across Maryland, the town changed little during the past 25 years as development around it boomed.

Rectifying that situation and updating Kensington’s appearance, entertainment offerings and business base without diminishing its turn-of-the century charm is a work in progress. For the past three-and-a-half years, the town council and Mayor Fosselman have been working to help Kensington redefine itself as a more progressive and attractive destination. With a small

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budget and big determination, they’re looking to shepherd into place a wave of upgrades, new initiatives and an updated sector plan that will result in revitalization.

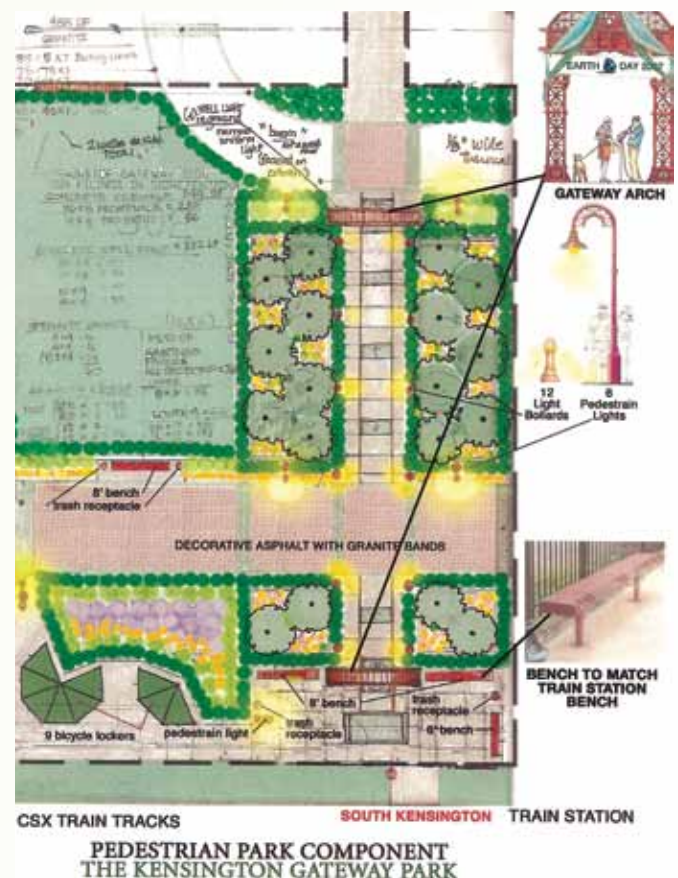
The effort is about “breathing some new life into the town,” Mayor Fosselman said.

A public relations firm was hired to create a marketing plan, and the Urban Land Institute was commissioned to outline a durable future for an outdated Kensington. The county was lobbied for an update of the area’s 36-year-old sector plan, opening the door for new projects that will be more reflective of modern use and building trends.

The result is a marketing strategy from Maier and Warner Public Relations that aims to better identify and improve Kensington’s key attributes, creating a brand identity and attracting more visitors, shoppers and new businesses. A print advertising campaign is under way to promote town treasures, including thriving arts and theater communities, unique shops and a weekly farmers’ market. A November 2008 Urban Land Institute report targeted several sites for redevelopment, and a nearly complete master plan update that introduces Montgomery County’s new CR zone (Commercial Residential) will allow developers more use and density-flexibility than traditional mixed-use zones—of which Kensington has had none.

Kensington’s heritage dates back to the opening of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Its historic architecture is attributed to Washington, D.C. developer Brainard Warner who, after becoming enamored with the Kensington district during a visit to London, decided to recreate its charm in a planned community back home. The town was incorporated in 1894.

Today, the one-half-square-mile town has a population nearing 1,900. Located about five miles north of the nation’s capital, it is at the center of the greater Kensington area, with 18,000 more residents. The Urban Land Institute report calls the town “a charming, peaceful, turn-of-the-century Victorian community with ... some of the most beautiful wooded streets and historic homes in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.”



Plans to transform a concrete plant foundation next to the MARC station into a downtown park are among Kensington's revitalization efforts.

But it also notes that “with its primary shopping attractions and Victorian neighborhood charm hidden by aging storefronts and gas stations, the town has become less of a destination and more of a pass-through community, hindering opportunities for commercial revenue.” A short portion of Connecticut Avenue, a major commuter artery carrying up to 55,000 vehicles a day, bisects the community and is referred to by some as “Gasoline Alley” for its number of service stations.

It’s a moniker that Kensington officials want to vanquish, along with some dilapidated lots and unsightly warehouses, in favor of redeveloped projects with new boutiques and restaurants and renewed and expanded town mainstays, like its renowned Antique Row, the Farmers’ Market and West Howard shops offering fine furnishings.



Kensington's marketing materials sport a new look.

“We don’t want big-box uses,” said Mayor Fosselman. “We’re looking for charming boutiques, small retail shops, restaurants and galleries. We’re looking for uses to compliment the antique shops we have.”

Supporters of the revitalization know that they need to prime the pump to catch the interest of new business, sprucing up the town’s appearance and laying the groundwork for new projects. It is a long process of which Mayor Fosselman said the town is in the middle; the beginning focused on convincing town leadership and longtime residents that the renewal was needed. Already a new Safeway store has opened and the town’s oldest shopping center just got an attractive facelift.

“There was some animosity,” he said, but with persistent outreach and openness, a consensus among town residents and neighboring communities was reached.

The early stage also involved working on the update of Kensington’s 1978 Sector Plan, the oldest in Montgomery County. It was a “hard process and it’s almost over,” Mayor Fosselman stated. The county Planning Board approved the update in November and the County Council reviewed the plan in February. Mayor Fosselman hopes the revised plan will

demonstrate to potential investors that Kensington is welcoming to new projects.

Kensington’s outlook “is not the stodgy old mentality it used to be,” he said. “It’s progressive, forward thinking, open-minded and extremely inclusive ... wanting everyone to participate, including people from outside” the town.

Supporters are quick to point out the work that has already been done to change the perception of Kensington, mainly as only an antiques venue or a convenient gas stop. Promotion of venues and activities that already exist is underway. For example, the Saturday Farmers’ Market used to be April through November. The market now operates year-round, featuring meats, seafood, breads and specialty items in the off-season.

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A new Web site, www.ExploreKensington.com, has been launched to keep visitors informed of other ongoing attractions such as the activities of the Kensington Players and the historic Noyes Library for Young People. There are also a number of annual events like a September 8K race and the Paint the Town Art Show.

Town ordinances have been changed or adopted in support of streetscape beautification, including one that limits the size and duration of signage. Neon or backlit signs are also prohibited.

The town has also won some legislative victories. In 2008 a state law prohibiting liquor service in the downtown area was reversed, opening the door for more restaurants, and legislation was passed to give the town quasi-zoning authority, assuring more local oversight of development.

Last fall preservationists successfully lobbied to save Kensington’s historic centerpiece: the Warner Circle Mansion and its 4.5 acre garden, which will become offices for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. The building will offer public conference rooms and the grounds will be maintained as a public park.

Kensington is a small town, but town believers think its offerings and potential can make it a rival for neighboring locations like Bethesda, Rockville and Silver Spring that currently attract larger numbers of shoppers, diners and event goers.

Mayor Fosselman said becoming a destination location will be a boon to town residents as the town’s tax base is increased, allowing the town government to provide better services. “That’s the goal in this,” he added.

It is a small town journey that, for now, can be measured in parts. “We’re definitely meeting all of our goals,” Mayor Fosselman said. The hope, he added, is that after the town has demonstrated a willingness to invest in itself and its future, there will be businesses that will, too. ■

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